



MEMORANDUM

To: City Council Finance Committee

From: Aston Park Tennis Center Focus Group

Date: October 8, 2014

Subject: Aston Park Tennis Center Focus Group Report

Aston Park Tennis Center has a long history of serving the residents of Asheville. It is a jewel in the center of the city that provides important recreational opportunities to the residents of Asheville as well as visitors to the area. Asheville should be proud to list Aston Park Tennis Center as a landmark to healthy living, engaged citizenry and economic impact.

The Aston Park Tennis Center Focus Group concluded its review of public comments regarding tennis center operations. The Focus Group recommends five main points that resounded prominently throughout the public engagement process.

- 1) Continue to operate the Aston Park Tennis Center as an affordable, City of Asheville department managed facility.
- 2) Clearly identify and establish an acceptable level of subsidy for the tennis center.
- 3) Implement a moderate fee increase to begin with the 2015 tennis season.
- 4) Develop a business plan that will reduce expenditures and enhance revenues.
- 5) Establish a Tennis Center Advisory Board empowered to implement positive change for tennis center operations.

Attachments:

- A) Report on Public Engagement – Summary of public comments and Focus Group meetings that support the recommendations of the Focus Group Report.
- B) Two-Year Financial Baseline Example – The Focus Group worked to provide an example of a moderate fee increase and expense reduction over a two-year period to reduce the city subsidy to the Aston Park Tennis Center.

Focus Group Report on Public Engagement

Background:

At the request of the Asheville City Council Finance Committee, staff gathered public comment regarding Aston Park Tennis Center operations. It hosted two public meetings on September 4, 2014, and public comment was open via the City's website through September 30, 2014 on the areas of operations listed below.

- 1) Fee increase comparison to incrementally increase fees over a 3-year and 4-year period
- 2) Tennis Center management, revenue and cost saving opportunities, and general operations
- 3) Tennis Center maintenance operations

Focus Group:

As part of the public process, a volunteer Focus Group formed to evaluate and consolidate the public comment to best represent overall feedback from the tennis community.

Focus Group Members: Ashley Arrington, Chris Barcklow, Sallie Bissell, Elaine Blanton, Dan Costant, Susan Eggerton, Lucy Keil, Paul Kelman, Ginger McLeod, Renate Rikkers, Marty Ruatto, Christian Theodossiou, Tom Youngblood

Staff Liaison: Mark Halstead, Debbie Ivester, Laura Loftis

Process:

The Focus Group met over a six-week period to evaluate and prioritize the public comment. Public comment evaluation was based upon strong public response and impact on reducing the subsidy to Aston Park. The Focus Group also discussed ideas to pursue to further reduce the city subsidy. The Focus Group considered and referenced the Aston Park Tennis Business Plan Options prepared by the City of Asheville Finance Department for the Finance Committee staff report dated May 27, 2014.

Public Comment Summary:

The Focus Group and public comment strongly supports the City of Asheville to continue to operate the Aston Park Tennis Center. It agrees fees should be increased, and the City should look at other opportunities to increase revenue and to reduce expenses.

Throughout the process, the Focus Group demonstrated interest in what the Finance Committee considers to be an acceptable goal to reduce subsidy for Aston Park Tennis Center. They felt reducing the subsidy is necessary but does not agree to zero subsidy, especially in relation to the City subsidizing other parks and recreation facilities.

Tennis Center Fee Increase:

- 1) There is overwhelming public support for a modest fee increase to pass holder fees, and a modest increase to daily court use fees.
- 2) There was no public support for the proposed 3-year and 4-year fee increase. The Focus Group felt this proposal presents too drastic of an increase and will drive away

customers. The end fee of the proposal is too expensive for public courts and will drive pass holders to private clubs where more amenities are available for a similar fee. In general that as public courts, the fees should be affordable for the general public.

- 3) There is unanimous public support for increasing the senior age fee from the current age of 50 to 65 years old. The Focus Group concluded this will have a positive impact for increasing revenue while having a limited negative response from the public. The Focus Group also supported having a senior discount for non-residents as well as residents.
- 4) The Focus Group is in favor of increasing the Family Fee. The Focus Group recommends the fee to be raised to a level where it is still favorable for families but increases revenue for the facility. "Family" should be defined in order to determine this fee.

Operations:

- 1) Do not lease tennis center operations to a management company. Public comment unanimously supports this. The Focus Group is concerned a management company will raise prices to a point the general public cannot afford the courts and public court time will not be available due to large number of tournaments.
- 2) The Focus Group's concern is not all tennis park users are paying the appropriate fees, and recommended staff take steps to insure that users are accounted for and pay the appropriate fees in the following areas of operations.
 - A) United States Tennis Association league teams and players
 - B) Tournament tennis players
 - C) Daily use and pass holders check in
- 3) The Focus Group recommends offering a comprehensive tennis program including but not limited to developing and expanding tennis lessons, clinics and racquet stringing to increase revenue.
- 4) The Focus Group felt the economic impact of tournaments at the tennis center should be considered when determining the subsidy level. A recent article in the Asheville Citizen-Times (9/27/14) highlighted the numbers of people who travel to Asheville to play in tennis tournaments and the money they spend locally. The City subsidizes other events that affect the economic impact on the local economy.
- 5) Develop a sponsorship, advertisement and grant program to generate revenue other than user fees. The Focus Group identified numerous possibilities, from advertisement on court windscreens to sponsorship of tournaments and programs.
- 6) Evaluate and design tennis center staffing levels to best support tennis center operations.
- 7) Use the tennis center club house to offer tennis and non-tennis classes during the tennis off season.
- 8) One of the tennis center's largest operating costs is water. Explore installing a well at the tennis center to use of well water to water courts and reduce operating cost.
- 9) Evaluate and design use of court lighting at night to either limit the amount of time lights are on and reduce electricity cost, or increase court fees during times when court lights are on to offset electricity cost.
- 10) Develop a structured volunteer program to support tennis center operations in area including but not limited to:
 - A) Sponsorship, advertisement, grants, fundraising

- B) Sweep and maintain courts and lines
- C) Signage for patron responsibility in maintaining the courts/facility
- 11) Develop a Tennis Center Advisory Board
 - A) Assist and advise in operations
 - B) Fundraising
 - C) Develop a sponsorship program
- 12) The Focus Group feels the City should consider TDA and other grants to improve the facility which in turn will generate more use and more revenue.

Maintenance:

- 1) Keep all tennis courts as clay. Do not convert to hard courts. Public comment overwhelmingly supports this.
- 2) The Focus Group stressed the importance of public clay courts and the advantages over hard court surfaces. Clay is easier physically on the body and allows people to continue to play as they get older. The Focus Group acknowledges that clay courts require more work and are more expensive to maintain than hard courts, but the advantages of clay courts for the health and active lifestyle of patrons and the ability to offer tournaments that provide a strong economic impact are worth the increased expense.
- 3) The Focus Group identified tennis center parking as vital to the viability of the tennis center. Currently there is very little parking at the center, with a private lot across the street at Hilliard and Pearl Street that has been used for many years as tennis center parking. The lot is in poor condition, and there is no agreement between the City and the property owner for tennis center use so use of the lot is not secured. The Focus Group recommends securing the lot and/or develop additional parking on the back area of Aston Park, or on the adjacent Park Maintenance facility.